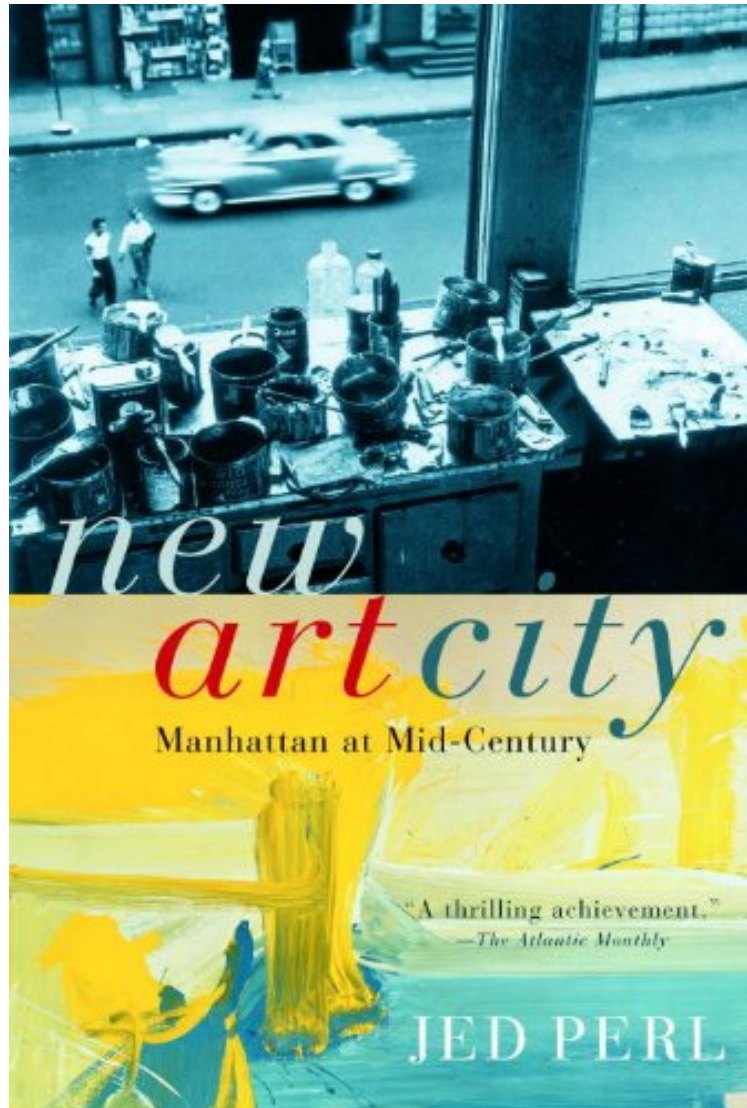


New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century

Jed Perl

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Exemplary...focuses not only upon the major figures of ascendant movements but also upon how a variety of independent-minded artists, energized by the vitality of the mid-century exchange of ideas, found individual means of expression."—*The Washington Post Book World* "The sort of grand marriage of criticism, history and biography that Edmund Wilson achieved in his finest books. . . . A thrilling achievement."—*The Atlantic Monthly* "Bound to stand as the definitive volume on this hectic and fertile period in American art for years to come."—*Art News* "Fascinating . . . by far the most thorough account of the 'triumph of American painting' that we have. . . . A splendid achievement and an exceptionally worthwhile read."—*The Christian Science Monitor* "Shows the incisiveness and pluck of George Bernard Shaw writing about music or Pauline Kael reviewing movies. . . . Opens onto new surprises at every turn."—*San Francisco Chronicle* "Few people write about art as beautifully, one might say as tenderly, as Jed Perl."—*The Wall Street Journal* From the Trade Paperback edition. About the Author Jed Perl was born in New York City in 1951. He received a BA from Columbia College and studied painting at the Skowhegan School in Maine. He was a contributing editor to *Vogue* in the 1980s and has been the art critic for *The New Republic* since 1994. Among his books are *Paris Without End: On French Art Since World War I* and *Eyewitness: Reports from an Art World in Crisis*. He lives in New York City with his wife, the painter Deborah Rosenthal. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. THE PAINTER AND THE CITY "Mitche, why aren't you home painting?" This was what Hans Hofmann said to Joan Mitchell when he saw her out walking her dog early one morning in the paint-happy 1950s. Hofmann was in his seventies and Mitchell was turning thirty. She had studied with him briefly, in the school he had run in Manhattan since 1933. And like so many other artists of her day, she had felt the casually messianic impact of this man who was thickly built, with a large, powerful head and an orator's way of using his arms and hands to underscore a dramatic point. In the 1950s Hofmann and his wife, Miz, were living in a fifth-floor walk-up on Fourteenth Street, not far from his school, which was on Eighth Street, and Mitchell worked in several studios in the neighborhood. Hofmann and Mitchell would run into each other in Washington Square Park, that patch of green dominated by the famous triumphal arch, and all around them was Greenwich Village, with its extraordinary cache of nineteenth-century domestic architecture and its occasional modern storefronts and its faded fascination. The Washington Square of Henry James's story, with its Old New York gentility, had vanished long ago. For half a century the neighborhood had been home to bohemians who placed their hopes in socialism or in art-for-art's sake, and by now the artists and writers sometimes seemed to be outnumbered by the tourists in search of a glimpse of the *vie de bohème*. All of this was an amazingly comfortable backdrop for Hofmann and Mitchell and their friends, who walked along those familiar Village streets, immersed in their own glorious reimaginings of art and life and New York City, secure in the knowledge that they would make everything new. Hofmann, a painter and teacher who laid out the principles of modern art in a sometimes nearly impenetrable German accent, could have been Mitchell's grandfather. He could have been a father to Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, artists who had already racked up achievements that left Mitchell and her young friends awestruck. And yet there was an agelessness about Hofmann. Rudi Blesh, a writer who was as interested in ragtime and jazz as he was in the new American painting, observed that Hofmann "paints spontaneously with fury that is a real fury even if it is cheerful rather than grim." For painters and sculptors of Mitchell's generation, who listened to Hofmann in his school or on a street corner or at a gallery opening, it was almost incredible to imagine how far he had traveled. And now Hofmann's rich and varied life—which had begun in Bavaria in 1880 and had included long periods in two of the great European cities—was coming to a climax in New York in the mid-century years, when the melting-pot city was reaching the boiling point. New York itself was incredible, "really like a Byzantine city," according to de Kooning, who was thinking of a city of contrasts and contradictions, a city where people from all over the world came together. The thought was seconded by Robert Motherwell, a young painter who had begun to exhibit in the 1940s and who explained to the poet Frank O'Hara that "New York City is a Constantinople, a great Bazaar." The Byzantine city was a trading city, a place of exchanges, of cross-fertilizations. Pat Passlof, another young painter, who had studied at Black Mountain, the experimental college in North Carolina, was back in New York in the fall of 1948 and found that the artists she knew created a Byzantine city within the Byzantine city. She said that her artist friends were as varied as "the characters from a Russian novel. . . . There were Italians; there were Greeks; there were Egyptians and Dutch and Spaniards and Armenians and Russians and even two Icelanders." And they were all "so extreme in their personal and national traits and philosophies, so shrewd in dialogue, so immersed in art, that

conversation, even a chance encounter on the street, was complex—and there were those street encounters again, encounters that we will be hearing about all through the mid-century years. Many of the artists Passlof was talking about had studied with Hofmann, and most of those artists would have agreed that what Hofmann, a tough-minded visionary, brought to New York were the secrets of modern art, of an art that exulted in essences and that sometimes seemed to have changed everything about art and that was now as old as Hofmann himself. He had been born a year before Pablo Picasso and two years before Georges Braque, both of whom he'd known in Paris at the beginning of the century. Hofmann grew up in Munich, where his father was a minor government official. In the decade leading up to World War I, he had lived the artist's life in Paris, where he had been close to Robert Delaunay, one of the pioneers of abstract painting, and had drawn beside Matisse at a legendary school, La Grande-Chaumière. World War I forced Hofmann back to Munich. It was there, in 1915, that he had opened his first school and taught until the beginning of the 1930s, when, in response to the worsening political situation, he began to accept teaching offers in the United States, some of them from Americans who had earlier traveled to Germany to study with him. In each of the world cities where Hofmann lived—in Paris, in Munich, and, finally, in New York City—he was passionately involved with drawing and painting. When he was alone in the studio, however, he had not always found it easy to let loose with paint. In Germany he had painted hesitantly if at all; he had become something of a custodian of Parisian discoveries, subsuming his own creative urges in his urge to bring the meaning of modern art to a younger generation. Only after he had settled in New York was Hofmann really able to jump back into painting. He had a one-man show with Paul Cassirer in Berlin in 1910, and no other solo exhibition until 1931, in San Francisco; in the late 1940s he began to show his paintings regularly in New York. His American years, all the way from the early 1930s to his death in 1966, were an expansive time in New York, and Hofmann contributed more than his fair share to the heat and brilliance of the city. He was a man with a romantic sense of the individual's at-an-angle relationship with society and a dialectician's belief that to flourish in the world you had to embrace a broad, grand struggle. And Hofmann found in the new city of art a place where his gifts were at last fully in play. "If I had not been rescued by America," he announced in 1944, "I would have lost my chance as a painter." As the New York years passed, Hofmann's painting—which in the 1930s and 1940s included some boldly, exuberantly calligraphic canvases of that primal scene, the artist's studio—became ever more daringly intuitive, until his knockabout abstract clashes of hot and cold colors and soft-edged and hard-edged forms were capable of telegraphing any emotion or impression, from black-midnight terror to summertime ecstasy. The paintings that Hofmann produced in the 1950s and 1960s are a dazzle of color. While this is unabashedly painted color, with all the lurid force and crazy artificiality of the stuff that comes out of a tube, Hofmann somehow manages to use his electrically unnatural hues to create a whole variety of naturalistic effects. He excels at shimmers and halos and sparks and radiant glows, and he's terrific at suggesting a mysteriously effulgent darkness. He's also a master of textures, which in his work range from watercolored to impastoed, from cake-frosting smoothness to stucco-like roughness. Often in his painting, colors and textures are pushed to dissonant extremes, so that the artist's power is presented in perpetual, turbulent play. He knows how to achieve a beyond-analysis impact, as if we are seeing a brilliant sunset right after a fast-moving storm. *Pompeii* (1959) is a red painting, insistently vertical. The full cry of the red is opposed by rectangular forms, in magenta, cool lemon yellow, deep golden yellow, and bright light green. Other areas of the canvas have softer, darker edges. There's one large form in a blackish but frothy green, and there are a few small bits of blue. The painting is jazzy, swank, opulent. While you may miss some element of honest equivocation, there is no question that the painting's stentorian presence is unforgettable. *Pompeii*, which lives up to the volcanic history of the ancient Roman city, is one of many compositions in which the hyperbolic effects are paired with unabashedly metaphoric titles, such as *Orchestral Dominance in Yellow*, *Golden Blaze*, *Moonshine Sonata*, *Summer Nights*'s *Bliss*, *Pre-Dawn*, *Lava*, *Towering Clouds*, and *Indian Summer*. These works announce a new kind of free-flowing pictorial experience. The rapid-fire play of color and shape and texture incites wild metaphoric imaginings, until you hardly know where the ecstatically melodramatic experiences end and the beguilingly sensuous ones begin. II While mid-century New York did not produce a single quintessential artistic figure, Hofmann held a unique, almost talismanic position in that very complicated world, and it is good to linger with him for a while now, as we approach the Manhattan of the 1940s and 1950s, with all its crazy variety, with all its artists and dealers and museum people and collectors and critics and gallerygoers and museumgoers. The lectures that Hofmann gave in Manhattan in the late 1930s attracted an extraordinary roster of young New Yorkers, including Arshile Gorky and Clement Greenberg, and although in the early years Hofmann's school was not especially well attended, with perhaps a dozen or so students at a time, his underground fame was spreading very fast. Nell Blaine, who began painting in Virginia when she was a child, had heard about Hofmann from a teacher, Worden Day, who had studied with Vaclav Vytlacil, who had studied with Hofmann in Germany. America was beginning to develop an underground network of young artists who were crazy to grasp the principles of modern art. Blaine was twenty when she arrived in Manhattan in 1942 to attend the Hofmann School; she would later recall, "I came . . . to New York to study with Hans Hofmann as a pilgrim comes to Mecca." And as time went on, his influence only grew. Writing in 1948, the year after *A Streetcar Named Desire*

opened on Broadway, Tennessee Williams, who was a frequent visitor to Provincetown, where Hofmann ran his school in the summer, described Hofmann as a "bold and clear-headed man who paints as if he understood Euclid, Galileo and Einstein, and as if his vision included the constellation of Hercules toward which our sun drifts." Look closely at Hofmann's forcefully, exultantly improvisational canvases, Williams seemed to be saying, and you will find that this man who had left the Old World and embraced the New World reveals not only the secrets of modern art but also the secrets of modern life. There was nothing static about the grandeur of art, at least not as Hofmann presented it. There was always a sweep, a lift to Hofmann's pronouncements. He spoke of the "movement and countermovement" in a work of art as creating a "spiritual life." He spoke of "a life of the spirit without which no art is possible—the life of a creative mind in its sensitive relation to the outer world." And Hofmann took these mystical German pronouncements and gave them a concreteness, a New York practicality. He offered his students a new version of what amounted to the eternal verities of art. He insisted that an artist who wanted to give form to the most complex and ecstatic dimensions of human experience had to begin by attending to the humdrum specifics of his craft. When the critic Harold Rosenberg, who had himself attended Hofmann's lectures in the 1930s, sought to explain the secret of Hofmann's essential place in New York, he said that as far back as the 1930s, that "decade of ideologies—New Deal, Marxist, Fascist—it was plain that the Hofmann teachings, too, offered a KEY." The key, for Rosenberg, was Hofmann's insistence that "art was the supreme activity." Fair enough. And how did Hofmann give such a supremacy to art? At this point we have to listen to Hofmann very closely, we have to try to imagine ourselves back in his school, with its easels arrayed chockablock and the smell of oil paint in the air. Standing there, Hofmann would hold up before his students a sheet of plain-as-plain-can-be paper and announce in that crazily accented English of his that "within its confines is the complete creative message." Now, this could sound like a very small thing, but it was in fact a very large thing. What Hofmann was saying was that when you drew a line on a piece of paper, you were creating a world. "Pictorial life," Hofmann asserted, "is not imitated life; it is, on the contrary, a created reality based on the inherent life within every medium of expression. We have only to awaken it." And here, in this talk of life and reality and awakening, we see Hofmann's fascination. The life that an artist awakened within the dimensions of the sheet of paper was all mixed up with the awakening of mid-century New York. And Hofmann's genius had everything to do with pushing artists to go into the studio and find, there, the world outside. He insisted that only by concentrating on the small, practical things in the studio—by attending to the nitty-gritty, to the step-by-step construction of a painting or a sculpture—would artists ultimately discover the big truths, the grand ideas. Hofmann refused to accept any mechanistic relationship between art and life, and yet wasn't it becoming increasingly clear that the hard labor of several generations of artists was having its magical effect, and that mid-century Manhattan was coming alive with a tidal wave of new forms? These included Hofmann's brazen flourishes of color; Mark Rothko's shimmering, hovering, soft-edged, forever floating rectangles; Jackson Pollock's quicksilver skeins of paint unfurling panoramic arabesques; and the crushed, jagged, turning-back-on-itself calligraphy of Willem de Kooning's gnomic alphabets. And there was much more: Joseph Cornell's beguiling boxes, with their propitious juxtapositions; Burgoyne Diller's levitating rectangles; Joan Mitchell's delicate weaves of muffled, sooty color; Nell Blain's explosive renderings of quotidian scenes; Fairfield Porter's cool interiors, all pale grays and pinks and browns; and Ellsworth Kelly's extraordinary simplifications, suggesting sails or semaphores. And all of that was still only the beginning. III The broadest outlines of this postwar story are very familiar, some might say all too familiar. As early as 1960, the art historian Robert Goldwater—who was married to the sculptor Louise Bourgeois and knew the Abstract Expressionists from the days when they were anything but famous—observed that the New York School had already "lived a history, germinated a mythology and produced a hagiology; it has descended to a second, and now a third artistic generation." Goldwater had been following the arts since the 1930s (his pioneering study, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, appeared in 1938), and he may have been a little stunned at how rapidly events had unfolded in the years after the war. Earlier generations of New York artists, such as Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, had also achieved a mythic aura, but somehow it didn't seem as if as many people had fallen under their spell. While the avant-garde art of Jazz Age Manhattan had had a kind of popular fascination, that could seem a localized phenomenon to the generation of Pollock and de Kooning, who found that American avant-garde art was becoming an internationally recognized shorthand expression for the postwar boom—for its fast-forward, experimental spirit. In 1949, when the *Magazine of Art*, of which Goldwater was editor, sponsored a symposium on "The State of American Art," Douglas MacAgy, who had turned the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco into a West Coast outpost for the New York ferment, argued that the new American art embodied an "esthetic variability" that mirrored "the frank acknowledgment of heterogeneity, which marks the present century." MacAgy was celebrating American art, with its panoply of new forms, as a reflection of a broader, international experience. And in a fifteen-year period that began roughly with de Kooning's first one-man show at the Charles Egan Gallery in 1948 and ended when Pop Art was the darling of the news media, New York became, by near universal agreement, the world center for artistic experimentation. New York was a magnificent symbol of the new American prosperity, and

even though the artists often regarded themselves as being out of step with a consumer society, their extravagant images could be seen as symptomatic of an era that— in spite of the Korean War, the Cold War, and the threat of the Bomb— felt to many like a time of expanding possibilities. From the Hardcover edition.